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Trouble-the-House.--A Legend of Livonia.

Once upon a time there lived in the province of Livonia, a certain peasant, named Peter Letski. Peter had no relation that he knew of in this world, but his mother. She and her husband had come from Courland long ago, when they were married; but the man died five and twenty years before the time of our story; and old Roskin and her son lived in a cabin of pine logs he had built on the lands of the boyer Nicklewitz. The boyer took rank with the high and ancient nobility of Russia. His ancestors fought against the Mongols, and held office under Ivan the Terrible. They were said to have been rich, but little of their wealth had descended, for there was not a poorer estate or a more prudently supplied *hof* in the province. Theodore Nicklewitz sowed his own hemp and rye, mowed his meadows, and set a good example to the reapers in the harvest time; while his wife and two daughters brewed quass, baked rye-loaves, preserved everything, from cranberries to caviare, against the winter, and spun with their maids great packs of yarn for sale to the eastern merchants.

In short there was work for man and maid at the *hof*; but the quass was always strong, the holidays were well kept there, and most of the peasants thought that a seat in the great hall worth having, when the snow was deep at Livonia. Somehow, Peter and his mother preferred the old cottage. It was built, as we have said, of pine logs, out of which were cut the door, and window, the latter glazed so to speak, with a sheet of thin mica; the roof was of wattles, overlaid a yard deep with turf and clay, and as green as a meadow in summer. Their property, besides a cow and a patch of rye-ground, consisted of a loom, a stove, a spinning-wheel, and a chest, wherein were laid up the Sunday clothes which Peter's father had left him, and those which old Roskin had inherited from her mother. They were free peasants of the old Germanic race, long settled in Courland. No boyer owned or maintained them; but Roskin was a noble spinner, and Peter had few equals at the spade, axe or flail. Of schools Peter Letski knew nothing; books he had never seen, except in church; and the only education his mother gave him was, "My son be honest, and trust in God."

Under that brief, but often repeated lesson, Peter grew up, one of the best sons in the province. It was his fixed opinion, that no woman on earth could equal his mother in knowledge, prudence, and house-keeping, besides she had been friends, relations and all to him. Though poor, they had been happy together in the log cabin, whose rent, as well as of the rye-field, was paid in hard work to the thrifty boyar. In summer and harvest time, Peter was bound to devote certain days to his fields; Roskin spun at the *hof* winter evenings; while her son made baskets, nets and fishing tackle, always getting as near as he could to the wheel turned by pretty Niga, whose soft blue eyes, and light golden hair had turned the heads of half the peasants in her neighborhood. Like Peter, Niga was an only child, but death had taken away her mother. Her father, honest Ivan, as the peasants called him, was a stout old boor, who hewed wood in summer, in the forest, and in winter at the *hof;* he and his axe belonged to the boyar. Niga, of course, was a born serf, but old Roskin said she would make a good wife. Peter thought so too; and the wedding crowns of gilt paper, kept in the neighboring church, would have been required but for the scheme of their common master. His old nurse had died some years before, leaving an unmarried daughter, for whom the boyar had promised to provide; and, to do him justice, he tried to find her a husband; but Ratinka had become so notable for tongue and temper throughout the parish, that neither serf nor freeman could be induced to take her for better or worse, even with a promised portion of twenty silver rubles.

All his own serfs were unfortunately married. Theodore Nicklewitz had, therefore, fixed his eyes on Peter as the only chance for Ratinka; and as neither he nor his mother liked to leave the old cottage, and they could not buy Niga's freedom, the young man was obliged to content himself with avoiding his intended spouse as far as possible. When things were in this state, a courier from St. Petersburgh arrived one summer's day at the *hof* with great intelligence. A younger brother of the boyar's father, who, having no estate, not liking the church, and still less the army, had degraded himself in the eyes of his relations so far as to become a corn merchant. Of course he was regarded as a blot in the escutcheon; no one spoke of him even at Christmas; but the man lived long, gathered money, retired from business, and died in his country-house, near Riga, very old, rich, and intestate.

Theodore Nicklewitz was his nearest heir, and an honest lawyer (we are writing of olden times) sent him word to come and take possession. It was an event in the boyar's life, for he had never been so far from home; but he sent for the priest—made his will, and took five stout men to guard him. Peter's master obtained his inheritance; but so much time was spent in proving himself the heir according to law, and in hunting up the old merchant's money where it lay in banks and bonds, that the corn was reaped and housed, the snow had fallen, the frost set in, and there was safe travelling over lake and river, before Theodore Nicklewitz, with the goods and chattles of the discarded relative, gathered to the last rag, and packed on sundry sledges, drove home to his careful family.

Half his servants had been sent for to help in that home-bringing, and among the rest, Peter Letski. The sledge he drove was a borrowed one, and somewhat crazy, on which account it was placed under his care, for Peter was a prudent driver. For the same reason, the goods packed in it, were the very gleanings of the merchant's country-house—old coats, shattered crockery, and odds and ends of all sorts, which the boyar thought might be useful some day. Peter's horse was borrowed also, and lazy with long service. Vigilance and exertions on the driver's part were required to keep up with the company. Night had fallen on them when far from the end of their journey, but master and man went merrily on through the keen frost and clear starlight. They were bringing goods and money to the *hof;* the boyar would be a rich man now; the serfs looked for more liberal house-keeping; and Peter began to speculate on the probabilities of Ratinka's getting married. The old horse was going steadily; he drew his wolf-skin cloak closer around him, and one dream, maybe, followed another through his brain, till a suitor was found, Ratinka disposed of, and Niga and himself dancing at her wedding.

Here a sound of somebody stepping into his sledge among the rags and crockery, made Peter start up and rub his eyes. No one was there—but he had been asleep and dreaming. The horse left to its own discretion, had been distanced by the whole company. Peter could not hear the sound of sledge-bells, but he knew they were not three versts from home, for on his right lay a ruined castle, where, it is said, a covetous bishop lived long ago, and oppressed the country by exacting tithes and dues, till the northern heathens took the castle, and hanged him. Its roofless walls stood gray and lonely on the frozen plain. Peter urged his horse onward till they were fairly left behind; but, just as he drew up his cloak once more, and settled himself to go home comfortably, a sharp, shrill voice at his very side said:

"That's a fine night, Peter Letski."

"It is," said Peter, his hair beginning to rise, for he could see nobody. "Who are you?"

"They call me Trouble-the-house," replied the voice.

"It is an odd name, friend," said Peter. "Where did you come from?"

"Never mind where I came from," said the voice in a still sharper tone. "I'm going home to the hof with you and the rest of this fine legacy."

Peter was frightened into silence by this statement; he would have jumped out, but the old horse had suddenly quickened his pace to a full gallop, and the sledge flew over the snow so fast that the lights of the hof were in sight; and in a minute more Peter was through the timber-gate and in the yard, where the rest of the company were rapidly unloading.

Every man from the boyar downward, inquired what had frightened his horse, for the creature stood trembling. Peter didn't care to tell them, but there was no sledge in the yard more quickly emptied than his own. Nothing but the rags and crockery could Peter see, though he thought there was a kind of rustle in the rye straw as the last old pot came out, and a queer sound of stumping steps going in before them all to the great kitchen, where a supper, which satisfied even the serf's expectations, awaited them.

There was no want of brawn, sour cabbage, and hard cheese, on that long table, at which, after old Livonian fashion, master and servant sat according to rank; yet the feast did not go off as joyously as might have been expected. The youngest daughter broke a china bowl which had been in the family for fifty years—that upset the boyardeen; the boyar became so critical before the bottle of corn brandy on his right was quite empty, that he found fault with every thing said or done; and all agreed that Peter Letski did no justice to himself or supper.

Peter lost no time in relating the cause of that unwonted neglect to his mother when safe in their own cottage; and after minute inquiries touching what he had to drink on the road, old Roskin said she never heard of such a traveler in all the tales of Courland—one didn't know what come with a corn merchant's legacy; but her advice was to keep the story between themselves until Father Michael, their priest, should return from visiting his brother in Upper Lithurnia, which would certainly take place before Christmas. His mother's advice was Peter's law.

He went on threshing, basket-making, and sleeping, as in other winters; old Roskin, too, spun as usual at the *hof*, but the *hof* was not the place it had been. Its industrious quiet had been broken to bring home that legacy, and could not be restored. The servants grumbled for stronger quass; the daughters repined for new dresses; the boyardeen grew more careful than ever; and the boyar thought every man was stealing.—Then there were grand visitors, counts and barons, who came from leagues away, and had to be entertained in the great parlor, never before opened except for wedding feasts. Among them was a certain Count Ratschoff, who would have married Theodore's eldest daughter, but the boyar and he could never come to an understanding on the subject of her dowry. However the Count had been in St. Petersburgh seven years, looking after a legacy he did not get, and having some knowledge of the great world there, he undertook to instruct the whole house of Nicklewitz, touching their dignity and interest.

Under his direction, the peasants were not allowed to speak in the old familiar forms to their betters; the kitchen was obliged to wait till the parlor had finished, and got only broken victuals; the rye-bread was weighed; the quass was measured, and the boyar resolved to have Ratinka married without delay. His determination was signified the week before Christmas, when, one evening after dinner, Peter was summoned to the parlor door, to see his master seated in great state, with his pipe, tobacco box, and a quart cup in the form of an eagle, filled to the brim with brandy, before him. Peter had never beheld the splendors of that apartment. Its silver candle-sticks, its walls covered with crimson leather, and its gilt ceiling, which shone on the wedding festivities of Theodore's great-grandfather, overwhelmed the Courland peasant, but his mind was relieved from the weight of its magnificence by his master demanding: "Peter Letski, when do you intend to marry Ratinka, my nurse's daughter? I will give her a portion of twenty silver rubles. Father Michael will be here in three days; and my will is that you make ready for the wedding."

"Master," said Peter quietly, "it is my fear, that Ratinka might not agree with my mother."

"Your mother!" cried the boyar fiercely, for he had tried the brandy: "I'll have no such excuses. Either marry Ratinka, or leave my land."

Peter had never seen the boyar so angry, and he stammered out in his confusion, "I knew how it would be when Trouble-the-house came after the legacy."

It so happened that Count Ratschoff, who sat drinking with the boyar, imagined, and not without private reasons, that Peter was speaking of him; so, with brandy in his brain, he made but one bound from the table to poor Peter, seized him by the collar of his sheepskin, and kicked him out of the *hof*.

Though a free man, Peter was brought up in Livonia, and ran as fast as possible from the Count's boots. The night was pitch dark, for moon and stars were hidden by a heavy mist; and when Peter thought of quickening his pace, neither the hof nor its dependencies could be seen. There was a red gleam on the plains before him, which he took to be the great pine torch shining through his mother's window. Old Roskin was at home that day nursing their cow, which had fallen sick, and Peter had sad intelligence for her.

He knew it would break his mother's heart leave the old cottage, and she didn't admire Ratinka more than himself; but the young man resolved to go home and take her advice, anyway. The light guided him steadily through the mist, but Peter never thought the way so long. He quickened his pace; the light grew larger and stronger. It wasn't his mother's torch now, but the blaze of a huge fire, which, to Peter's astonishment, rose from the bishop's ruined castle, at the entrance of which he found himself, while a dead horse and an upturned sledge lay close in the snow.

Peter had a good conscience, but he was frightened to the heart, when the sharp shrill voice, once more saluted him with: "Peter Letski that's a fine night!"

"Middling," said Peter. "Who are you?" as, looking in its direction, he saw a dwarfish old man clothed in rags, which had once been rich fur and velvet, and so thin that his bones seemed fleshless—striving to raise the upturned sledge.

"I'm a brother of the traveller you took home with the corn merchant's legacy," said the dwarf.

"Are there any more of you?" inquired Peter.

"A great family, and like to be greater," replied the dwarf. "Come and help me to raise this sledge."

"Is it yours?" said Peter, who would have helped anything, as between them the sledge was lifted, and he saw it was richly lined and gaily painted.

"Everything is ours," cried the dwarf, thrusting his hand under the crimson cushion and drawing out a leather money-bag.—"Take this," he continued, chincking it at Peter's ear, "and I'll go home with you.—What are you thinking of man?"—as Peter held back both his hands. "This would buy the land your cottage stands on; and the boyar would be glad enough to sell it before my brother's done with it."

"I'm thinking how my mother would like it," said Peter.